

:8 Grieving Gay

We've looked at the journey. We've looked at the myth. We've looked at grieving. We've come to see that grieving is a useful metaphor for both psychotherapy and spiritual formation, but that there is a difference. Traditional psychotherapy aspires to give everything over to the ego. Spiritual formation aspires to give the ego up, too. Now we must look at how all of this relates to the gay predicament.

In the course of a lifetime, some people have to grieve more than others. There's no reason for it. It isn't necessarily fair. "Man asks, 'why me?' God answers, 'Why not' " There is little use in calling it cruel and inhuman. It is just how it is.

There is a danger in even *saying* "Some people have to grieve more than others." It can trigger obnoxious outpourings of indulgent self-pity. After all, what do you get from knowing that you have a harder row to hoe than the next guy? When all's said and done, your row is your row.

But in order to understand why gay patients need more spiritual nourishment than most other people, it is important to know what makes their situation different. We saw earlier that gays are excluded from the myth, from the structures and systems that most people use to gain a sense (albeit false) of security and well-being. We took a look at what this means already. We saw a few examples of how it works. It is time to look it square in the eye. What is the experience of grieving gay?

People tend to underestimate the plight of gay people. Gays soft sell their lot mostly because they've gotten used to it; it feels "normal." Bleeding-heart heterosexuals understate gay oppression mostly to assuage their consciences. "Oh, it's not really so much worse for gays. Things are tough all around." And, of course, conservative reactionaries (Moral Majority types) think that anything short of burning at the stake is too lenient.

As a way to avoid such minimizing, let's take some time to peruse a sampler of the things most gay people have to give up. I don't intend this survey to be a manifesto, a declaration of grievances, or a prelude to "poor us." It is here for one purpose only: to make clear how it is.

Let's start with relationships. How about families? I haven't known too many openly gay people whose families welcomed them with open arms. Partial or utter rejection are more common reactions.

Since a friend of mine came out to his mother, he hasn't heard from her. It's been three years. He is the oldest of three children; she now talks about her two kids.

More common is partial rejection. "O.K. Now we know," parents of another friend of mine said to him when he told them he was gay. "But don't *ever* mention it to us again!" He still goes home for visits, but there's that awful hole there, that huge part of his being that he's not allowed to share with them: his lover, their life together—its pains, its joys.

Badgering and ridicule from those nearest and dearest are also common fare for gay people. The story of Tim from Norman Brown's book is a breath-taking example of that. But it's a fairly ordinary story. Like a patient whose alcoholic mother calls him twice a week and begins each conversation with lines like, "Well, who's my queer son screwing around with *this* week?"

Gay people who were heterosexually married and have children often face a very painful kind of grieving having to do with child custody and visitation rights. Recently in Virginia, a lesbian mother legally lost all right of contact with her son.

After divorcing her husband, she was given custody of the

child. She began living with a lesbian lover; her ex-husband remarried. One evening, he arranged to pick up their son purportedly to go to a dinner party. They never returned.

He took the child out of state, called his ex-wife, and told her he was keeping the boy. She was upset but they agreed she could visit.

Some months later, the man's new wife sued to adopt the child, basing her argument on the mother's unfitness because of her sexual preference. She won. The boy's mother is now forbidden to have any contact with her son at all.

Granted, this is a dramatic example. But most gay male and lesbian parents face tremendous grief and pain around the issues of child custody and visitation rights.

So much for families. Then there are relationships with friends. Gay people who come out after having lived secretly for a number of years usually hope to keep their straight friends. Sometimes they do. Most often, they don't. Sometimes they are just out and out cut off. "You're *what*?" If not cut off, they are seen as an embarrassment to socialize with or invite over. "I'd love to have you two over for my birthday party," a woman told a lesbian couple I know, "but it would freak my mother out. Maybe just the three of us could get together sometime." They never did.

Having a gay friend often touches a raw nerve in straight people. So many Americans have unresolved sexual conflicts that a gay person evokes in them a shadow side of themselves that they find terrifying. It's nothing personal, of course, but it makes them drift off anyway.

The fact is that when gay people come out, they usually end up in a ghetto.

What happens with co-workers is about the same story as what happens with friends, but it's more frightening. After all, unless you quit, you are "stuck" with your workmates. If an openly gay person encounters a homophobic co-worker or boss—even if they can't be fired—life at work turns into a perpetual hassle.

Being gay means giving up many personal relationships. But there's lots more to let go of. Take, for example, security.

First, there is job security. In most places in the United States, employers with impunity can fire gay employees "just because." It often happens. Take, for instance, my boss at the software firm. The company was located in Maryland where there are no protective laws for gay people. He *legally* could have fired me on the spot. (The only reason he didn't, by the way, was because he was afraid of publicity.)

In the few places where homosexuals *are* protected by law from discrimination in employment, there are still tried and true techniques for getting rid of gay employees. (They were perfected on blacks and women.) You either don't promote them, or harass them, or disenfranchise them. They eventually leave. Like my friend Judith.

Judith was assistant director of a college library in Washington, which *has* protective laws. A new male director was hired and soon discovered that Judith was lesbian. He found out by pestering her for a date until she finally told him she was homosexual and had a lover. Over the course of the next three months, he divested her of her entire job, giving pieces of it—a little here and a little there—to other employees. He even stopped inviting her (the assistant director, you'll remember) to staff meetings. Her days consisted of sitting at her desk reading library journals.

When salary increase time came around, unlike her one-time subordinates who got seven percent raises or more, Judith got nothing.

She stuck it out for nine months, hoping it would blow over. It didn't. And mind you, all the while, as he slowly "stuck it to her," the director was *most* cordial.

After nine months, Judith started looking for another job. She eventually found one. But the director still managed to get in a parting shot. He refused to give her a recommendation. In his words, "I just haven't been able to get a feel for what you can do."

Although I know of no studies that substantiate this, I suspect that the majority of openly gay people fall into the lowest national income categories.

But there are other things to be secured besides jobs. Like

your rights and your health and maybe even your life. Gay people who need legal or police protection generally don't get it. Refusal of a lease on an apartment because the resident manager "can't stand fags," dismissal from a job, or denial of credit are usually lost causes for gay people in terms of recourse.

Homosexuals who get beaten up by "queer-baiters" or "rolled" have learned not to bother dialing 911. Police attitudes in many places (especially rural ones) are commonly, "They got what they deserved." Worse, in a lot of cases, gay victims don't report such incidents because they're afraid of "blowing their cover."

A friend of mine, Ken, visited a man in Chicago last Christmas. Saturday night, they were walking through the city (just walking, mind you—not holding hands, embracing, or otherwise "flaunting" their gayness). A carload of young thugs pulled up, assumed that the two were gay, dragged Ken off to a van, beat him unconscious, and dumped him in a gutter thinking he was dead. Actually he only had a severe concussion, two black eyes, loose teeth, and bruises from one end of his body to the other.

Anyway, Ken went to the police. They sized him up, figured he was "one of them," took the report *pro forma*, and, as he left the station, told him amusedly that he shouldn't expect to hear from them.

Aside from giving up protection, there is living with outright legal persecution. In most states, homosexual acts are considered felonies. For example, were I and a lover to move to Virginia, we could successfully be prosecuted and imprisoned for making love. (Incidentally, in Virginia, we could also be refused driver's permits and drinks in a bar.)

An attempt by a gay person to make social contact with someone on a sidewalk can be dangerous. A gay man I knew walked up to a man he found attractive (in an area where gay people hang out) and, thinking he was gay, gave him "the eye" and pulled out a terribly tired old line, "Got a light?" What he got was arrested by a plainclothesman for "solicit-

ing." (Could you imagine a straight man being arrested for "putting the make on" a woman in the same context?)

Being in a gay bar (unfortunately the only social outlet for many gay people) can reap harassment or arrest outside for "loitering" or "jaywalking" or arrest inside on equally trumped-up charges if the bar is raided. If gay people get jailed on manufactured charges like these, they can expect degrading treatment, not to mention being prime targets of sexual assault.

What about security in religious institutions? Surely, the bosom of Holy Mother Church. Well actually, more often than not, churches foment homophobia. Gays can expect to be excommunicated or excoriated by fundamentalists, evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Mormons, Baptists, and most Lutheran or Methodist congregations. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, Unitarians, and Quakers (especially the last three) are more accepting of gays, but even there, acceptance means tolerance.

Ordination is denied gay people in all denominations except the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Church. Marriage for gays is forbidden by all denominations, which at the same time condemn homosexuals for engaging in "promiscuous sex," i.e., sex outside of marriage.

Another whole set of exclusions from the myth are applied specifically against gay couples. Since gay marriages are denied legal recognition in every state of the union, the legal and financial benefits that accrue to straight married people are legally denied gay people. Take Penny.

Penny is an older woman, who lived with her lover Melissa for seventeen years. They owned a home together, all of its furnishings, a summer cottage, and a boat.

Melissa died last year. In her will, she specifically left everything to Penny. Melissa's family, who had had nothing to do with her for years, became greedy after she died. They contested the will on the grounds that Penny and Melissa were "unrelated" and that Melissa, by virtue of being homosexual, was "mentally unsound." In the rural county where the case

was tried, the family won. Penny, at fifty-eight, lost everything: the house, the cottage, the boat—even the bed she and Melissa had slept in for seventeen years. Such wills are routinely broken, and many a gay spouse or lover has been left broken and penniless.

Equally oppressive is that, just as gay people can't legally marry, so they can't legally divorce. Since gay people who separate can be just as vicious as straight people in the same predicament, things can get pretty ugly. But all of the protections that civil law provides for separating straight couples are missing in the case of gay couples.

Then there is a potpourri of subtle ways in which gay couples get passed over by the myth. Listing a gay spouse or lover as beneficiary on a life insurance policy is usually impossible; joint applications for auto insurance (even on a jointly owned car) are denied; health insurance inclusion for a gay spouse is disallowed; and filing joint income tax returns is prohibited. Public displays of affection—a kiss goodbye to a lover on a street corner, an arm-in-arm stroll, a spontaneous hug, dancing—can in most places reap a gay couple anything from arrest for "lewd and lascivious conduct" to sniggers and giggles to being beaten to a pulp.

Next are the double-binding, no-win imponderable social situations. What do you do when invited to a party that you know is going to be suburban straight and the host says, "Bring a friend"? If you leave your lover home, you both feel awful; if you go together, you both feel awful uncomfortable.

And what do gay couples do about visiting relatives, especially around holidays? Let's say the couple isn't out. With their families expecting them each home, either they go to their respective homesteads (and miss the most important days of the year together) or they spend the holidays together (and deal with confusion and fury on the home front). If the couple is out, the situation is usually no better. Families who may tolerate having a gay son or lesbian daughter home for Christmas most often forbid them to bring along a lover or spouse. The same double-bind obtains.

Notice that the list so far is skewed toward adult gay people

who are to some degree open about their sexuality. But what about homosexuals who are too afraid to come out?

We who live in cities often err by generalizing from our own urban experience where gays have more freedom and protection. But most people don't live in cities. Many live in rural areas where being openly gay is a terrifying prospect.

For three years, I lived with a lover in a rural county of Maryland. We spent a good deal of time locked in a very claustrophobic closet. There were both shades and drapes at all of our apartment windows and we made a furtive ritual of closing them whenever we came home.

I held a prominent position in the county government, and he taught in a parochial school. The schizophrenia of our lives was almost unbearable. I weighed fifty pounds more than I do now, developed alarmingly high blood pressure, underwent two G.I. series in a year to try to detect a suspected ulcer, carried medication around to treat regularly recurring stomach cramps, and suffered from insomnia and severe headaches. And I was only twenty-six!

It was "red-neck" country. Besides tobacco farming and shellfish harvesting, the major county occupation was drinking. It wasn't a crazy paranoid fantasy at all to imagine a bunch of the boys, drunk at the local bar, getting bored and deciding to go "mess up the two 'queers' who lived down the road." In the three years I was there, I heard "fag" jokes almost daily as well as many a relished tale about how so-and-so and so-and-so had beat the shit out of the fairy who worked at. . . .

The homophobia that gets controlled into benevolent discomfort for bleeding-heart liberal heterosexuals in cities and suburbs is raw and unmitigated in rural areas. As with blacks not so long ago, gays aren't seen quite as people. Killing a "queer" is about equivalent to shooting a rabbit. But there's more to it than that; there's more hate in it.

At any rate, being dumb but not stupid, I decided early on that my survival in rural Maryland depended on my closet. But at what price?

It would be comforting to think that the rural mindset about

gays is changing. But fundamentalist preachers in rural towns still call for homosexuals—abominations of God—to be locked up, burned at the stake, or mutilated. Their congregations take them seriously.

Another whole class of people not yet mentioned who have grieving to do are emerging gay teenagers. I have told several stories so far about gay men who were tormented through their school years for being “sissies.” There are similar stories for girls who get labeled “dykes.” Almost without exception, patients that I see recount such tales. It would be nice to think things are changing, but in fact, the torment continues.

About two years ago, I facilitated a workshop for teachers in the District of Columbia public school system to help them better understand and deal with gay students and their homophobic classmates. The horror stories they told were incredible.

Like the sixteen-year-old boy (slightly on the “effeminate” side) who was being chased around the locker room by a group of his peers who were trying to pin him face down and shove an umbrella into his rectum. They had just about succeeded when a coach just happened to walk through and intervened.

What made such stories worse was how matter-of-factly the teachers told them; they appeared to be common occurrences.

When you put all of the particulars together, the gestalt is oppression. The experience is not of moving from one particular to another; it is a constant, chronic feeling of not belonging, of being threatened and rejected.

The point is that we are not looking at some negative philosophical hypothesis on society’s part that a gay person may simply disagree with and choose to ignore. We are looking at a monolithic system bent on making life for gay people as miserable as possible. It confronts the gay person at every turn. In the words of a close friend, “You live with it every minute of your life.”

The whole structure of means for achieving comfort and security that is taken for granted by straight people is denied gay people. Most things that *everybody* wants in order to feel “safe and sound” are simply not attainable by homosexuals. Living without them causes tremendous anxiety. Giving that

security up is exceedingly difficult. And yet this is precisely what most gay people are forced to do.

Helping gay people grieve at this level is very difficult. Giving up parental support—perhaps never being able to see parents or siblings again—is an excruciating letting go. It’s like having your whole family die at once. Knowing that, almost overnight, you might lose your job if your supervisors changed or “found out” makes dreaming or planning for the future very precarious. Realizing that you could walk down a street in most cities, be identified as gay, and be beaten up or worse can make death a not-too-subliminal, ever-present companion. Hearing people hurl insults at you from passing cars, or preachers denouncing homosexuals from pulpits, the radio, or TV, or reading about the latest anathema from Rome and not being immobilized by rage or self-hate is no easy maneuver. Reading in *Newsweek* about the latest poll confirming that most of the people in the country consider you sick or immoral or despicable is not an easy burden to lift off your shoulders.

What may be hardest about helping gay people give up all of this stuff is their lack of choice about their plight. The giving-up gay people have to do doesn’t begin voluntarily; most would just as soon buy into the myth and live as happily ever after as they *think* their straight counterparts are living.

In contrast, some people *choose* to buy out of the myth. People who join ashrams, for instance, know life will be hell sometimes. They know what gurus are like. They know they will have to give up most of what gave them comfort and security. But the point is nobody forced them to do it. They chose their lot.

The bottom line, of course, is that gay people just don’t have a choice. Oppression is simply what gay people face when they are authentic.

Well, what do gay people do when faced with oppression? There are three common strategies: avoid it, fight it, or suffer through it. Let’s look at those three options.

Avoiding the oppression usually means pretending you’re not oppressed. It amounts to being stuck at the denial or bargaining stage of grieving. For gay people, it often takes the

form of a closet. Unlike the two other predominant minorities discriminated against in our society—blacks and women—being gay doesn't necessarily *show*. Under a cloak of secrecy, many gay people hide and manage to build very tall houses of cards; they move into very well-appointed closets. They often come into therapy troubled by very severe neurotic behavior (e.g., depression, paranoia, phobias, alcoholism) but are indignantly affronted if you suggest that there is a link between such behavior and being in a closet. We'll see some of this in Joe's story, later on.

Another type of avoidance usually happens in the course of therapy. In the process of grieving old chains that bound, gay patients sometimes go through a period of feeling their negative self-image turn positive. It feels like the whole world is opening up. This has some dangers, as a patient named Ed discovered.

Ed had been working very hard in therapy. In the course of a year, he had grieved a lot. Together we had taken the painful trip back through an appalling childhood and adolescence. He reclaimed and wept for eighteen years of mistreatment at the hands of two very sadistic parents who catapulted him into adulthood with almost no sense of worth.

Ed looked, and cried, and went through a period of murderous rage at two people who had hurt him so deeply, who tortured him so resolutely, especially around his identity as an emerging gay person. Public humiliations, constant harassment about his homosexuality, forced trips to unenlightened psychiatrists, and hospitalizations that included electroshock aversion "therapy," all were part of the horror story he unfolded.

Slowly (like Rachel) he cried himself dry and screamed himself hoarse over most of the horror and fear he had carried with him into adulthood. And bit by bit, he came to know his own goodness and worth as he liberated himself from all of the messages he had been shackled with that were intended to destroy him (and almost did). He began to like himself, to feel powerful. For a while he was intoxicated with his sense of well-being and freedom.

I recall one session in this ebullient period in particular. Ed came in more exuberant than I'd ever seen him. He told me how good he felt. How wonderful it was to no longer feel like dirt, or a freak, or a derelict, or a sinner. The hour ended with Ed on cloud nine. He had finally freed himself from the chains of his past. The world was his.

He emerged onto the street (he told me in the next hour) and was almost immediately accosted by a group of five inner-city toughs who had pegged him as homosexual. They collared him, called him a "fag," a "fairy," a "queer," a "punk," roughed him up, took his wallet, and ran off laughing.

The next hour was a heavy one. Ed had learned in a cruel way the limits of his freedom. He came to know that he had another whole level of grieving to do. The past he had pretty well dealt with. But the present had, until then, eluded him. And he hadn't even considered the future.

It is not enough, in therapy, to help gay people transform a negative self-image into a positive one because the world into which they emerge is, quite literally, "out to get them." It's no paranoid projection; it's for real. Not only must gay people give up attachment to what might have been but wasn't, they must also let go of what might be now and isn't and what the future might have held but won't.

It is important to keep this in mind when working with gay people. It is worse than useless to harbor the illusion, let alone communicate it to the patient, that having completed therapy, the gay patient will find a way to live "happily ever after." That is foolish even if you are working with straight patients. It is frankly cruel to offer that kind of hope to a gay patient. Gay patients will ask for it. They will want to believe that if they just work hard in therapy, make the right changes in their lives, that the burden of oppression meted out to them as gay people will be lifted off their shoulders. That kind of hope you cannot offer. Your silence in the face of such verbalized hopes, painful though it may be, will, however, help the patient deeper into the abyss—which is all they will be able to see at first—but also into the bosom of God.

Another ingrained way to deal with oppression is to fight

it. But railing against the oppressor doesn't work very well either. It's being stuck at the anger state of grieving.

When I make statements like that, I usually drive gay activists up a wall. "What are you advocating?" they retort. "Should we just lay down and take it?" And, of course, being something of an activist myself, I don't mean that at all.

I'm not suggesting that gay people shouldn't protest or march or write letters or circulate petitions. The oppressed have got to speak the pain of their exile if they're going to be authentic. "To be silent when they should protest makes cowards of men."²

But what do you do with your anger if you lose? If you're attached to winning as opposed to genuinely speaking your pain, and you're fighting a losing battle, you may spend the rest of your days enraged. Many gay militants do.

Then there's suffering through, a very common way gay people respond to their oppression. Suffering through is being stuck at the depression stage of grieving. Another word for it is despair.

My stereotype of a gay person in this situation is the fifty-year-old male government worker who puts in his eight hours a day, lives alone in an efficiency apartment, has no gay friends, is out to no one, and whose only social or sexual outlet is having clandestine, anonymous sex in public restrooms or parks or pornographic movie houses. He has given up, all right, but it is not a giving-up that frees. It's more like a caving-in. The oppression isn't just accepted; it's totally ingested.

Avoiding it, fighting it, or suffering through it don't appear to be very helpful ways to deal with oppression. There seems to be only one way out. Deeper.

I'm suggesting that since being in exile isn't negotiable, it might as well be embraced. And since it demands such drastic givings-up, it might as well be used as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Giving-up, after all, is manna for the spiritual journey.

Crazy as that may sound, it comes down to this. If you don't have any choice about being in exile, then why not *really* be

in exile? Why not affirm it with your whole heart and soul? It may not make sense. ("Why me? Lord, why me?") It may not seem fair or just. ("I didn't ask for this!") But it might just be a God-given invitation to spiritual deepening. It just might be a blessing in disguise. It just might be an opportunity.

What gay people ultimately have to give up is attachment to rejection and the need for people to affirm their wholeness and loveableness. It works like this.

If you can't get confirmation of your wholeness and your rightful place in the universe from *people* and the myth, you just have to look beyond them. You have no choice but to get it from someplace else, someplace deeper, someplace more cosmic.

If you give up denying, fighting, or wallowing in the oppression, you stop being stuck in the mud. Off you go down the road.

You begin to see that freedom and a sense of belonging aren't to be found in the myth at all. They never were. You begin to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world."³

As you begin to experience your belongingness on a cosmic level, everything seems to lighten up. It doesn't all feel so heavy. It just is. Then what people think of you or try to do to you doesn't matter so much. What matters is that you love and are loved by love. And nobody can take it away from you. Nobody. That's solid. That's real.

You begin to realize that you've got ahold of something very special. It's really what you were looking for all along. Then it dawns on you that the exile was a gift.

I'd like to tell you a story of a fellow who took that journey. He made it.

"I'm *not* oppressed," shouted a patient named Joe in response to my suggesting that he just might be. "I have a responsible job; I make \$25,000 a year; I own a condo in Alexandria; I drive a Pontiac Bonneville; I wear designer clothes; I go to Europe every other year; and no one has ever yelled anything derogatory at me out of a car window."

When I probed to find out how open he was about his sex-

uality, he became extremely defensive and summarily dismissed the whole matter with, "That's my personal life; it's nobody's business."

That would all track very well except for the fact that Joe harbored tremendous fears (uncovered much later) that he would be "found out." His parents were getting curious about his "roommate" of five years, and his employers had given up suggesting he bring "a friend" to business dinners. He suspected they "knew." Then there was the fact that Joe did all of his socializing in bars in Baltimore so that there would be no chance of his being spotted in Washington, and his equally denied worry that he might be drinking "a bit too heavily." Finally, there were the hypertension and rashes, and the upper G.I. series that had not yet detected an ulcer. But Joe was resolutely *not* oppressed.

For Joe, getting past denial took a long time. Again and again, I held a mirror up for him to see different aspects of his life. Again and again, he refused to look. Too painful. Too much to give up. His physical symptoms increased. The ulcer was finally diagnosed. The house of cards began to crumble.

Bargaining came next. Yes, he was oppressed. But if he could just come out to a few close straight friends, that would be enough. Just realizing the oppression made it, he thought, unnecessary to actually confront the situations that were hemming him in.

Ironically (the Lord provides), at about this time, a whisper campaign about him began at his office. A secretary had noticed that his "roommate" seemed to call him every day. Good material for a scandal. He was called in by his supervisor eventually, who told him about this "malicious rumor" and assured Joe that he would pay it no heed.

Joe began frantically looking for another job—another closet to crawl into. Next time he would be more careful: no calls from his lover, enough fake dates with women to ensure his cover, a "fag" joke here and there to leave no doubt in anyone's mind. His ulcer worsened. He was hospitalized for two weeks. A showdown lurked on the horizon.

Joe passed through anger and depression fairly quickly. Perhaps it was because he had been in therapy for a year and

knew what the process of grieving was about already. But it was probably more a function of being brought face to face with the choice of either giving up or dying. The house of cards had toppled and he knew it. At any rate, our next session after his return from the hospital was a landmark one. He cursed heaven and the injustice of the world. He swore revenge. And he cried.

Things changed a lot after that. Joe eventually came out at work. He wasn't fired, but he was given clear signals that he had seen his last promotion. Some co-workers shied away from him, but some were very supportive. Nobody treated him badly. His supervisor's communications became peremptory for a while and then softened some, but they've never really been the same. He still works at the same firm; it was the best option. It's a good job with good benefits. He likes the work. But it's a bittersweet situation. He must daily experience the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of oppression meted out to gay people. But it isn't intolerable.

Joe also came out to his parents and sister. It's been six months and his parents still won't speak to him. That hurts. But his sister "was cool," in his words, and had both him *and* his lover to her house for Christmas dinner (much to their parents' horror). Who knows where that all will go?

Joe now socializes in Washington. Why not? Everyone whom he feared would find out already knows. He has also become active in the local chapter of his religious denomination's gay caucus.

Is Joe happier? Hard to say. He experiences on a daily basis more of the pain of his oppression than he did before. But he also experiences more joy. Perhaps the point is that he simply experiences *more*. Now. In the present. In the world *as it is*. Many fewer games. Much less effort. Much more reality. Does that make him happier? Maybe it would be better just to say that he's glad he did it.

Joe's life as a homosexual will contain more pain than most. He will be subject to the entire spectrum of oppression sketched out in the sampler presented above. He will be "kept down" on the corporate ladder, probably tolerated at best by his parents, forced at least partially into a gay ghetto, denied

legal protections, and consigned to lower salaries than his ample talents and efforts would normally command. In short, he will be forced to dwell on the outskirts of society, in that **no man's land** between the fertile land and the desert. Joe's therapy, then, was a journey into exile—an exile he came to embrace.

In the past month, Joe has talked a lot about not needing society's approval any more to know that God loves him as a gay person. He talks about how church and society are wrong and that, if they only stepped back and looked at what they were doing, they would see how myopic they are being. He acknowledges with a bit of sadness that he will probably never know "total freedom" as a gay person, but that living "out" and trying to help educate the church "feels good because every little bit helps."

Joe, in my estimation, has broken through to a new level of awareness. He speaks now from a spiritual plane distinctly different from his previous one. The context in which he sees his life is inestimably broader. He had acquired some measure of cosmic perspective. He has given up to life in exile, not passively, but in a way that allows him to participate much more fully in his life as it unfolds, joy and sorrow, the whole mixed bag.

The clearest indication to me of Joe's new spiritual depth is his new-found ability to love, his openness. He's a totally different person to be with now.

The first time I saw him he was rigid, defensive, and closed. His brow was perpetually furrowed; his mouth set. He felt miles away, courteous but icy cold. Now his posture is relaxed. His face is remarkably different: unselfconscious, yielding, and soft. Now he's with me when we're together—intimately with me. He's a joy to spend an hour with. Sadly for me, there probably won't be many more of them.

My work with Joe is similar in many respects to my work with most gay Christians. The ground rules are simple enough. Keeping them is frequently difficult.

The job of anyone who sets out to be a guide for those on the journey is to help patients grasp reality as deeply and broadly as they are ready to handle. It means, as I have said

earlier, that the therapist must repeatedly hold a mirror up for patients to see who they really are. This is done in bits and pieces over a long period of time.

At first all patients can see is what they have established for themselves as a self-image. You invite them to look closer. They see more of themselves, some of which they like, some of which they despise and try to reject. You hold the mirror firmly. They look again and again and again. Perhaps they come to accept more, even the warts. For gay people, it includes their coming to accept and to be able to behold their sexuality.

You ask them to look again. Deeper. They notice an aura. This may be an aspect of themselves they hadn't noticed. They begin to grasp the holy, their spirits. You shift and begin using larger and larger mirrors. They begin to notice the context in which they live and have their being. Again, at first, all they will notice is the universe they have imagined. Then the aspects they hadn't noticed, both the beautiful and the ugly. For gay people, this will require looking squarely into a social milieu that oppresses them. The anguish of that must be drunk to the dregs.

Yet a larger mirror. And a larger. Until the context is infinity, eternity, the All, God. And then they perhaps just glimpse—for who can truly *grasp* the All—that they are there, minuscule perhaps, but integral parts of the cosmic puzzle, necessary parts for the puzzle to be whole, and that the All, in all of its contortions, is strangely beautiful.

Joe came to know his own goodness by looking beyond himself and society to the cosmic goodness of all that is. He learned to love by coming to accept God's universe in its totality—with all of its beauties, contortions, and contradictions. His new-found compassion and concern for church and society and his commitment to help them grow—in spite of how resolutely they will try to undo his efforts and oppress him—reflects his having struck a spiritual stratum far beneath many of his fellow human beings. As he sent his spiritual roots deeper, he tapped the fertile soil of unfathomable love. And now he is free, free to love ... anyway, give ... anyway.

